

By the next afternoon, Amanda has the six best shooters ready. I already know four of them—the three women and man have been the backup in the van over the last year. The other two must be new. Each is armed with a machine gun and will carry extra clips.

Their jobs won't be to kill the demon but to distract it and to weaken it. The demon is fast, faster than I am, but with their firepower, they will be able to cover a wide area, which will counteract its speed.

I watch them practice on the shooting range for a moment, then leave them to it. I have tests to go to. Doctor Sanderson wants to see how my body reacts to stress this time.

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I'm clenching my teeth on the metal bar between them as the electricity shoots through my body. I'm shaking, the leather restraints tying me to the chair stretched tight. I can't hear anything over my heartbeat and the pain screaming through me. I cannot control how my body reacts to the pain, but I can control what I do about it. I endure. Sanderson wants me to tell him to stop, to give a sign I have had enough.

He enjoys the test; I could smell it as he tied me down. I am confident he will learn much about how a hunter's body processes the information. He thinks I have limits; he said as much. I intend to prove him wrong.

The electricity stops, and I slump. When I manage to raise my head, Jason is with Doctor Sanderson, on the other side of the soundproof glass. Jason is angry, Sanderson argues back. If my ears weren't still ringing, I could make out what they are saying.

I close my eyes and force my body to relax. When I've regained control of it, I sit straight and wait to find out what happens now. Jason bursts into the room and undoes the restraints.

"The test is over. There's been a sighting." He's still angry as I follow him.

"What was the argument with Doctor Sanderson about?" I ask.

Jason takes a moment before replying. "His reports haven't been properly written."

This surprises me. I never would have thought Jason cared about how one of the scientists wrote the results of their experiments. Amanda is the one who demands that everything be done properly.

I watch Jason for a moment, and I can tell he does not want to discuss this. "What information do we have on the sighting?"

Jason takes a breath, and his heartbeat calms. "It's a messy one. No details on the demon itself, other than it's strong. The call went to the police first, and there was a patrol in the area. It went to confirm. The demon jumped out of the alley and threw the car away, with the officer still in it."

Jason looks over his shoulder as we wait for the elevator. The only thing directly visible from where we are standing is Sanderson's lab. I suspect Jason is angry about more than improper reports. The door dings and he shakes his head.

"The cop called for reinforcement, instead of us. Two other cars showed up and were overturned and tossed. They finally smartened up and evacuated the area, but it was a bystander who called us. A dozen injured by the time the call came in. No numbers on the dead, but the caller could see bodies inside the alley. Our guess is that the first officer interrupted the demon as it was moving its meal. Your backup will meet us at the hangar."

"That won't be needed."

"It could be the demon from the warehouse."

The door opened to the hangar.

"No, this is too public. It hasn't acted where civilians can see. This is going to be some young, angry demon. I can deal with those."

"They should still go with you, just in case."

"Jason, you said they couldn't spend their time following me. Let's keep them for when they are needed." I put on the gun belt and hooked up the swords.

"Alright, you're the closest thing we have to an expert on it, so I'll trust your judgment." He squeezes my shoulder. "Good luck." He leaves. Before he gets out of my hearing range, I hear

him grumble. "I'm going to have a talk with her about Sanderson. What he did can't be allowed."

The trench-coat already has the extra ammo; someone has been paying attention. I sit in the chair and Valerie places the sensors. I see Valdez in the passenger seat.

"I won't need your help," I tell her.

She shrugs. "I'm just here as standard support. It's my turn." She raises the machine gun, the higher-caliber one that was assigned to her as part of my backup, not the usual support one. "But just in case, I'm ready."

Valerie raises an eyebrow at the readings she gets.

"I just came from a stress test. Give me five minutes, and they'll be normal." I close my eyes as the van moves, and I feel the remnants of the test pass.

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The van drops me off at the end of the street, where the three police cars landed, forming a blockade. People have gathered behind them, watching the empty street, and to the side, there's an ambulance treating the officers. They turn to me and take pictures as I walk through them and past the cars. I don't understand the fascination people feel with demons. Demons are creatures that hunt them, so they should be fleeing, hiding. Instead, they are here, hoping to get a glimpse of it.

I can smell blood in the street, although I don't see any on the road. Possibly the officers, injured when the cars were thrown. The wind is wrong to carry the scent from the alley. The other end of the street is closed off with an ambulance and two police cars.

Something isn't right. I know it the moment I get hints of the demon's scent. It's that demon again. Why is it here? Is it after the rampaging demon also? Does it want to protect me from another trap? I move at an angle, putting distance between me and the alley's mouth while moving so I can see down its length.

I can see the body parts the caller saw. I see the blood they're covered with. I also see they are plastic. They are not people, but display figures from clothing stores. I saw some when Jason took me to buy clothing.

My eyesight is good, but how was the caller fooled into thinking they were from a human? The stress of the situation? Humans get overcome by stress easier than me.

This isn't a trap. Or at least not a trap my "savior" is here to protect me from. This was *that* demon. Injuries, but not death. I don't understand why it chose such a public display unless it knew I'd expect it to remain discreet.

It attacked the cars to make a scene, then threw them out of the way, putting them out of harm's way and making it clear everyone else should stay away.

This was a public display, but it wants the rest to be private. I reach for my phone but stop. It picked the terrain in such a way I wouldn't expect. Does it know we've made plans? Is it that smart? What will it do, now that I'm here; if I walk away and wait for the team to get here? Valdez isn't enough by herself. Can I trust that it won't hurt anyone and just wait for me to return?

I can't. Even if it doesn't do anything, what message will that send to those watching? I am their hunter, their protector. I can lose a fight—I can even die in one—but I can't walk away from one.

I step to the mouth of the alley. I don't see anyone in it, but the shadows are long with the sun almost set.

"I know it's you."

It steps out of a shadow forty feet away, into the little light that's left. It's still wearing the hoodie and pants, making it look human.

"What do you want?"

"I want to show you something." It surprises me again how deep its voice is, considering its small form.

"That's nice." I kick one of the plastic arms to its feet. "What happened? You don't like killing?"

You think that makes you good?"

It looks at the arm, then crushes it with a foot. "What I am isn't important. This is about them, not me. It is about the lies they tell you."

"Humans don't lie."

"Don't they?"

I step in the alley, out of view from the watchers. "I'm pretty sure you're not going to kill anyone, so how about you stop with the games and tell me what this is really about?"

The sun falls behind the buildings. My sight switches to heat, and I lose it almost entirely, the light from the few windows on the side of the alleys just enough to outline it.

Its lips stretch, and I can see hints of pointed teeth in its muzzle. If it's smiling, it comes across menacing.

"You know nothing of me. All you know is that I have not killed anyone in this city, yet." It turns and takes a few steps away. Its form shifts and grows. A lot. It looks at me over its shoulders. Even hunched it's a couple of feet taller than I am. Its eyes glow bright under elongating horns. "If you do not chase me now if you do not catch me, humans will die."

It takes me a moment to overcome the surprise and pull out a revolver, but it's already gone. I take off after it. I can't take a chance on it not being serious. It's a demon; killing is in its nature.

I can't get over how much it changed. I have never read anything about a demon shifting its form so much, going from something my size to twice that, and many times more massive. Is this a ruse? To make itself more frightening? Or—and my heart skips a beat, making me almost stumble—is this its true form, and the other was camouflage?

I want to call Jason and ask him—there has to be files I haven't read—but I need to focus on the hunt. If I want to protect humans, I have to catch it, and that requires all my attention.

It jumps up from one side of the alley to the next before it reaches the other street. Roofs mean more light, nowhere for it to climb, a better chance at catching it. I follow, using the fire escape to make up for my lack of claws.

I run as fast as I can once there, and I keep up with it. I want to shoot it, but I'd have to stop and aim. I can't take the risk I'll lose it. It crosses alleys in one stride like they aren't there. I jump over them and push myself. Why this game?

The hunt takes us to what has to be a less wealthy area. The roofs get progressively worse, to the point I have to avoid stepping into holes. It jumps over clotheslines, and I duck under them. Jumping over an alley, I can make out heat forms at the bottom, people curled up against the walls. Shouldn't they go home?

A few more rooftops, a group of old men we send screaming down the stairs, and it disappears over the side of the building. I jump down after it, and it's already running down the sidewalk, shoving aside anyone too terrified to move on their own. I smell blood, but they all get up.

It goes up a set of stairs and crashes through the door. I follow and almost collide with it as it stands still. I jump to the side just in time and look around as I regain my balance.

It takes a moment for my eyes to take in what I'm seeing, the thermal vision mixing with the dim light. We're in a large room. I can see where interior walls have been taken out, leaving only a few beams here and there.

People occupy the space, men, and women. The men are looking at us, fear and defiance on their face. A few of them are holding guns, semi-automatics, and a few more have them in their belts.

The women are lying on sitting or dirty mattresses, in various state of undress. Fear is the only thing registering on their face as they whimpers and cry. They are dirty, and they have been beaten.

I turn to face the demon. "What is this! Did you bring me here to gloat? To show me your handy work?"

The sound that escapes its mouth reminds me of Jason snorting. "This is not something I did."

"Then what? Another demon? A rival of yours you want me to take out? You're looking to use

me to make yourself more powerful in the city?"

It gets in my face, and for a moment the fear comes back, but I shove it down. I will not be afraid of it.

"Smell them," it says.

"I don't know what your game is, but I am not your plaything."

"It shoves me toward one of them. The human points his gun at me and starts to pull the trigger. I react without thinking. I grab the gun and raise it. The bullets make holes in the ceiling.

He smells human.

He's a recent addition. He hasn't come in contact with the demon yet. I let go of him and move to the one next to him, smacking the gun out of that one's hand. No demon scent. I move toward a third one. He's already pointing his gun at me, but I see the fear in his eyes, the tremble in his hand. I can tell he knows what I am, that he can't hurt me. I get close enough to him, and he doesn't move.

The guns follow me as I go from one to the other, but none of them fire. Jason told me, in the first few weeks after I woke, that humans have something called personal space, that they don't like when someone gets too close to them and into it, without invitation.

I am violating all their personal space, so much they are only focusing on me, and ignoring the demon hunched, so it won't rip the ceiling apart with its horns.

None of them have a trace of demon scent.

"What are they?" I yell at the demon.

"Humans." His voice is soft.

"No! Humans don't mistreat others until they've been tainted." I shake my head. "You've arranged this. You're trying to confuse me,"

"I am trying to show you the truth."

"This isn't true!" I wave my arm around the room and only now notice most of the men have fled. I have a slight desire to run after them, to hunt and not have to think about this, but I won't leave the women defenseless. They are pressing themselves against the walls, as far away from us as they can.

"Ask them." He points to the women. "You smelled the ones who fled, they are humans. Ask them who caused them such misery. See if I am lying."

I don't want to. I am terrified they will confirm what it says. I want to run, after the humans, or just away. The fear is telling me that anywhere is better than here.

And that is why I turn to the closest woman and crouch next to her. I will not listen to fear. I think her skin is pale, under the grime and the bruises, whiter than mine. She has blond, or brown hair; I can't tell, as dirty as it is.

She recoils away.

I can smell blood on her, hers. I pick up other scents too, some I've never smelled before, but they trigger something in me. Without knowing how, I know that something horrible was done to her.

I don't move closer, and I keep my voice soft when I speak. "Who did this to you?"

She looks at me for a moment, her gaze almost lifeless, then at the shattered door.

"The men?"

She hesitates, then nods.

"Has a demon come here before? Something like that?"

The terror in her eyes is clear as she shakes her head.

This can't be true, but humans don't lie. Except, if she's telling the truth, humans have lied to me. Her eyes grow even wider, and I know it's behind me.

I stand, turn, and punch it repeatedly. "No! I refuse to believe that humans would do this to each other." It blocks, but some make it past its defenses. His skin feels like it's rock-hard. "I've seen too many demons murder humans for you to convince me they aren't involved in this."

It backhands me, and I fly across the room, hitting a beam and falling to the ground.

"You think we want this?" it roars. "You think we want our young driven mad with hunger

and forced to the cities for food? We are being starved!"

I sit there, staring at it. I can see the anger in its eyes, the rage, and despair. No, it's trying to manipulate me.

"You're lying!" I push myself up. "Demons just showed up and started killing humans. You're the ones invading."

It barks something that might be laughter. "We were here long before the humans fell from the sky in their metal boxes. They are the ones who came here, and took the wilderness away from us."

I want to rebuke it, but how can I? I have never studied human history. Amanda and Jason told me this world belonged to the humans, and that was all I needed to know.

"What are you talking about?"

Its form shrinks until it's only a little taller than I, its horns barely nubs on its head. "We, the being humans call demons, are of the wild. Before the humans came, all of it was ours. Our young could hunt anytime they felt the hunger, and at that stage, the hunger controls them. Then the humans came. In those early days, it did not affect us. There were few of them, and the part of the wild they carved to build their cities was small. But their cities grew, and they took more of the wild until we had barely enough for our young to hunt. Then, with their hunger came the madness."

"I don't care. If you're telling me this because you want me to stop hunting, it isn't going to work. I'm sorry they're hungry, but it doesn't give them the right to kill humans. I was made to protect them."

A sound escapes it, a low whine. It turns and takes a few steps away from me. It spins and faces me again.

"If I wanted you to stop killing them, all I'd have to do is kill you." Its tone is harsh.

I sigh. "Then what do you want!"

"I want you to question who you are. What you are. Go to your humans, see the lies they have told you. Look through them and uncover the truth."

Its tone is calm, but I still recoil. Jason and Amanda haven't lied to me. They can't have. But they're the ones who have told me of demons and humans.

I look at the misery around me. They're the ones who taught me no humans would ever do what I'm seeing to another human. I don't turn around. I can't look at it.

"What will you do?"

"I will leave. You can tell your humans you killed me. I won't come back." It walks by me, on the way to the door. I see it shrink until it is close to my height, its skin forming around it to look like clothing. "If you decide the humans aren't worth your protection anymore, leave the city, and I will find you."